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Signed

Dated 28 April 2003



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GB 0208261.8

By virtue of a direction given under Section 30 of the Patents Act 1977, the application is proceeding in the name of

DOW CORNING IRELAND LIMITED,
Unit 12, Owenacurra Business Park,
Midleton,
County Cork,
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Incorporated in Ireland,

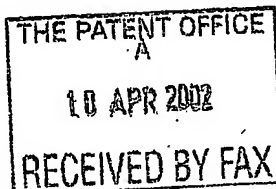
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Patents Act 1977
(Rule 16)The
Patent
Office10APR02 E709984-1 D02914
P01/7700 0.66-0208261.8

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The Patent Office

Cardiff Road
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NP9 1RH

1. Your reference

MSP616

2. Patent application number

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10 APR 2002

0208261.8

3. Full name, address and postcode of the or of each applicant (underline all surnames)

DOW CORNING CORPORATION
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USA

Patents ADP number (if you know it)

414029605

00414029001

If the applicant is a corporate body, give the country/state of its incorporation

USA/Michigan

SECTION 30 (1977) APPLICATION FILED 31/1/03

4. Title of the invention

AN ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE PLASMA ASSEMBLY

5. Name of your agent (if you have one)

A M Donlan

"Address for service" in the United Kingdom to which all correspondence should be sent (including the postcode)

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Patents ADP number (if you know it)

07995244001

6. If you are declaring priority from one or more earlier patent applications, give the country and the date of filing of the or of each of these earlier applications and (if you know it) the or each application number

Country

Priority application number
(if you know it)Date of filing
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Number of earlier application

Date of filing
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11.

I/We request the grant of a patent on the basis of this application.

Signature

Date

A M Donlan

10 April 2002

12. Name and daytime telephone number of person to contact in the United Kingdom

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DUPLICATE

AN ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE PLASMA ASSEMBLY

[0001] The present invention relates to an atmospheric pressure plasma assembly and a method of treating a substrate using said assembly.

5

[0002] When matter is continually supplied with energy, its temperature increases and it typically transforms from a solid to a liquid and, then, to a gaseous state. Continuing to supply energy causes the system to undergo yet a further change of state in which neutral atoms or molecules of the gas are broken up by energetic collisions to produce negatively charged

10 electrons, positive or negatively charged ions and other species. This mix of charged particles exhibiting collective behaviour is called "plasma", the fourth state of matter. Due to their electrical charge, plasmas are highly influenced by external electromagnetic fields which makes them readily controllable. Furthermore, their high energy content allows them to achieve processes which are impossible or difficult through the other states of matter, such as by liquid
15 or gas processing.

[0003] The term "plasma" covers a huge range of systems whose density and temperature vary by many orders of magnitude. Some plasmas are very hot and all their microscopic species (ions, electrons, etc.) are in approximate thermal equilibrium, the energy
20 input into the system being widely distributed through atomic/molecular level collisions. Other plasmas, however, particular those at low pressure (e.g. 100 Pa) where collisions are relatively infrequent, have their constituent species at widely different temperatures and are called "non-thermal equilibrium" plasmas. In these non-thermal plasmas the free electrons are very hot with temperatures of many thousands K whilst the neutral and ionic species remain cool. Because
25 the free electronics have almost negligible mass, the total system heat content is low and the plasma operates close to room temperature thus allowing the processing of temperature sensitive materials, such as plastics or polymers, without imposing a damaging thermal burden onto the sample. However, the hot electrons create, through high energy collisions, a rich source of radicals and excited species with a high chemical potential energy capable of profound
30 chemical and physical reactivity. It is this combinations of low temperature operation plus high reactivity which makes non-thermal plasmas technologically important and a very powerful tool for manufacturing and material processing, capable of achieving processes which, if achievable

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at all without plasma, would require very high temperatures or noxious and aggressive chemicals.

[0004] For industrial applications of plasma technology, a convenient method is to couple electromagnetic power into a volume of process gas which can be mixtures of gases and vapours in which the workpieces/samples to be treated are immersed or passed through. The gas becomes ionised into plasma generating the chemical radicals, UV-radiation, and ions which react with the surface of the samples. By correct selection of process gas composition, driving power frequency, power coupling mode, pressure and other control parameters, the plasma process can be tailored to the specific application required by the manufacturer.

[0005] Because of the huge chemical and thermal range of plasmas, they are suitable for many technological applications which are being continually extended. Non-thermal equilibrium plasmas are particularly effective for surface activation, surface cleaning, material etching and coating of surfaces.

[0006] The surface activation of polymeric materials is a widely used industrial plasma technology pioneered by the automotive industry. Thus, for example, the polyolefins, such as polyethylene and polypropylene, which are favoured for their recyclability, have a non-polar surface and consequent poor disposition to coating or gluing. However, treatment by oxygen plasma results in the formation of surface polar groups giving high wettability and consequent excellent coverage and adhesion of metal paint, adhesive or other coating. Thus, for example, plasma surface engineering is essential to the manufacture of vehicle fascias, dashboards, bumpers etc. and to component assembly in the toy, etc. industries. Many other applications are available in the printing, painting, gluing, laminating and general coating of components of all geometries in polymer, plastic, ceramic/inorganic, metal and other materials.

[0007] The increasing pervasiveness and strength of environmental legislation world-wide is creating substantial pressure on industry to reduce or eliminate the use of solvents and other wet chemicals in manufacturing, particularly for component/surface cleaning. In particular, CFC-based degreasing operations have been largely replaced by plasma cleaning technology operating with oxygen, air and other non-toxic gases. Combining water based pre-cleaning with plasma allows even heavily soiled components to be cleaned and surface

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qualities obtained are typically superior to those resulting from traditional methods. Any organic surface contamination is rapidly scavenged by room temperature plasma and converted to gaseous CO₂ and water which can be safely exhausted.

5 [0008] Plasmas can also carry out etching of a bulk material, i.e. removal of unwanted material. Thus, for example, an oxygen based plasma will etch polymers, a process used in the production of circuit boards, etc. Different materials such as metals, ceramics and inorganics are etched by careful selection of precursor gas and attention to the plasma chemistry. Structures down to nanometre critical dimension are now being produced by plasma etching
10 technology.

[0009] A plasma technology that is rapidly emerging into mainstream industry is that of plasma coating/thin film deposition. Typically, a high level of polymerisation is achieved by application of plasma to monomeric gases and vapours. Thus, a dense, tightly knit and three-
15 dimensionally connected film can be formed which is thermally stable, chemically very resistant and mechanically robust. Such films are deposited conformally on even the most intricate of surfaces and at a temperature which ensures a low thermal burden on the substrate. Plasmas are therefore ideal for the coating of delicate and heat sensitive, as well as robust materials. Plasma coatings are free of micropores even with thin layers. The optical properties, e.g. colour, of the
20 coating can often be customised and plasma coatings adhere well to even non-polar materials, e.g. polyethylene, as well as steel (e.g. anti-corrosion films on metal reflectors), ceramics, semiconductors, textiles, etc.

[0010] In all these processes, plasma engineering produces a surface effect customised
25 to the desired application or product without affecting the material bulk in any way. Plasma processing thus offers the manufacturer a versatile and powerful tool allowing choice of a material for its bulk technical and commercial properties while giving the freedom to independently engineer its surface to meet a totally different set of needs. Plasma technology thus confers greatly enhanced product functionality, performance, lifetime and quality and gives
30 the manufacturing company significant added value to its production capability.

[0011] These properties provide a strong motivation for industry to adopt plasma-based processing, and this move has been led since the 1960s by the microelectronics community

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which has developed the low pressure Glow Discharge plasma into an ultra-high technology and high capital cost engineering tool for semiconductor, metal and dielectric processing. The same low pressure Glow Discharge type plasma has increasingly penetrated other industrial sectors since the 1980s offering, at more moderate cost, processes such as polymer surface activation for increased adhesion/bond strength, high quality degreasing/cleaning and the deposition of high performance coatings. Thus, there has been a substantial take-up of plasma technology.

[0012] However, adoption of plasma technology has been limited by a major constraint on most industrial plasma systems, namely, their need to operate at low pressure. Partial vacuum operation means a closed perimeter, sealed reactor system providing only off-line, batch processing of discrete workpieces. Throughput is low or moderate and the need for vacuum adds capital and running costs.

[0013] Atmospheric pressure plasmas, however, offer industry open port or perimeter systems providing free ingress into and exit from the plasma region by workpieces/webs and, hence, on-line, continuous processing of large or small area webs or conveyor-carried discrete workpieces. Throughput is high, reinforced by the high species flux obtained from high pressure operation. Many industrial sectors, such as textiles, packaging, paper, medical, automotive, aerospace, etc., rely almost entirely upon continuous, on-line processing so that open port/perimeter configuration plasmas at atmospheric pressure offer a new industrial processing capability.

[0014] Corona and flame (also a plasma) treatment systems have provided industry with a limited form of atmospheric pressure plasma processing capability for about 30 years. However, despite their high manufacturability, these systems have failed to penetrate the market or be taken up by industry to anything like the same extent as the lower pressure, bath-processing-only plasma type. The reason is that corona/flame systems have significant limitations. They operate in ambient air offering a single surface activation process and have a negligible effect on many materials and a weak effect on most. The treatment is often non-uniform and the corona process is incompatible with thick webs or 3D workpieces while the flame process is incompatible with heat sensitive substrates. It has become clear that atmospheric pressure plasma technology must move much deeper into the atmospheric pressure plasma spectrum to develop advanced systems meeting industry needs.

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[0015] Significant advances have been made in plasma deposition at atmospheric pressure. Considerable work has been done on the stabilisation of atmospheric pressure glow discharges, described in Appearance of stable glow discharge in air, argon, oxygen and nitrogen at atmospheric pressure using a 50 Hz source by Satiko Okazaki, Masuhiro Kogoma, Makoto Uehara and Yoshihisa Kimura, J. Phys. D: Appl. Phys. 26 (1993) 889-892. Further, there is described in US Patent Specification No. 5414324 (Roth et al) the generation of a steady-state glow discharge plasma at atmospheric pressure between a pair of insulated metal plate electrodes spaced up to 5 cm apart and R.F. energised with an rms potential of 1 to 5 kV at 1 to 100 kHz. This patent specification describes the use of electrically insulated metallic plate electrodes. This patent specification describes the problems of electrode plates and the need to discourage electrical breakdown at the edge of electrodes. It further describes the use of the electrodes which in this case are copper plates and a water cooling system which is supplied through fluid flow conduits bonded to the electrodes and as such water does not come into direct contact with any electrode surface.

[0016] In US Patent Specification No. 5185132, (Horiike et al), there is described an atmospheric plasma reaction method in which plate electrodes are used in a vertical configuration. However, they are merely used in the vertical configuration to prepare the plasma and then the plasma is directed out from between the plates onto a horizontal surface below the vertically arranged electrodes.

[0017] In the applicants co-pending unpublished application, PCT no IE01/00138, a plasma system of the type comprising a pair of parallel spaced-apart planar electrodes with at least one dielectric plate therebetween and adjacent one electrode, the spacing between the dielectric plate and the other dielectric plate or electrodes forming a plasma region for a precursor gas wherein a cooling liquid distribution system is provided for directing a cooling conductive liquid onto the exterior of at least one of the electrode to cover a planar face of the at least one electrode.

30

[0018] According to the invention there is provided an atmospheric pressure plasma assembly of the type comprising a first and second pair of vertically arrayed parallel spaced-

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apart planar electrodes with at least one dielectric plate between said first pair, adjacent one electrode and at least one dielectric plate between said second pair adjacent one electrode, the spacing between the dielectric plate and the other dielectric plate or electrode of each of the first and second pairs of electrodes forming a first and second plasma region characterised in that the assembly further comprises a means of transporting a substrate successively through said first and second plasma regions and is adapted such that said substrate would be subjected to a different plasma treatment in each plasma region.

[0019] It should be understood that the term vertical is intended to include substantially vertical and should not be restricted solely to electrodes positioned at 90 degrees to the horizontal.

[0020] Preferably the means of transporting a substrate is a reel to reel based process. Preferably in such a case the substrate may be coated on a continuous basis by being transported through an atmospheric plasma glow discharge by way of a reel to reel based process in which the substrate travels from a first reel, through the first plasma region at the end of which is provided a guide means or roller or the like adapted to direct substrate which has passed through the first plasma region into and through the second plasma region and on to a second reel at a constant speed to ensure that all the substrate has a predetermined residence time within the respective plasma regions. The residence time in each plasma region may be predetermined prior to coating and rather than varying the speed of the substrate the length of each of plasma region may be altered such that the substrate may pass through both regions at the same speed but may spend a different period of time in each due to the path length of the substrate through the respective plasma regions.

25

[0021] Preferably each substrate needs only to be subjected to one pass through the assembly but if required the substrate may be returned to the first reel for further passages through the assembly.

30 [0022] Additional pairs of electrodes may be added to the system to form further successive plasma regions through which a substrate would pass. The additional pairs of electrodes may be situated before or after said first and second pair of electrodes such that substrate would be subjected to pre-treatment or post-treatment steps. Said additional pairs of

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electrodes are preferably situated before or after and most preferably after said first and second pairs of electrodes. Treatments applied in the plasma regions formed by the additional pairs of electrodes may be the same or different from that undertaken in the first and second plasma regions. In the case when additional plasma regions are provided for pre-treatment or post-treatment the necessary number of guides and/or rollers will be provided in order to ensure the passage of the substrate through the assembly.

[0023] Each electrode may comprise any suitable geometry and construction but preferably each electrode is of the type described in the applicants co-pending unpublished patent application number PCT IE01/00138 wherein there are provided electrode units containing an electrode and an adjacent dielectric plate and a cooling liquid distribution system for directing a cooling conductive liquid onto the exterior of the electrode to cover a planar face of the electrode. Each electrode unit may comprise a watertight box having a side formed by a dielectric plate having bonded thereto on the interior of the box the planar electrode together with a liquid inlet and a liquid outlet. The liquid distribution system may comprise a cooler and a recirculation pump and/or a sparge pipe incorporating spray nozzles.

[0024] Any suitable dielectric materials such as polycarbonate, polyethylene, glass, etc. and metal electrodes may be used. The metal electrodes may be bonded to the dielectric material either by adhesive or by some application of heat and fusion of the metal of the electrode to the dielectric material. Similarly, the electrode may be encapsulated within the dielectric material.

[0025] Ideally the cooling liquid covers the face of the electrode remote from the dielectric plate. The cooling conductive liquid is preferably water and may contain conductivity controlling compounds such as metal salts or soluble organic additives. Ideally the electrode is a metal electrode in contact with the dielectric plate. In one embodiment there are a pair of metal electrodes each in contact with a dielectric plate. The water in accordance with the present invention acts as well as being an extremely efficient cooling agent to also assist in providing an efficient electrode.

[0026] Ideally the dielectric plate extends beyond the perimeter of the electrode and the cooling liquid is also directed across the dielectric plate to cover at least that portion of

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dielectric bordering the periphery of the electrode. Preferably all the dielectric plate is covered with cooling liquid. The electrode may be in the form of a metal mesh. The water also acts to electrically passivate any boundaries, singularities or non-uniformity in the metal electrodes such as edges, corners or mesh ends where the wire mesh electrodes are used.

- 5 Effectively the water acts as an electrode of limited conductivity. Further, by having a vertical arrangement, the weight of large areas of electric systems are now placed so that there is not the same sag or distortion or deformation that there might otherwise be. The assembly is preferably retained in an outer casing as defined in the applicants co-pending application WO 01/59809 in which a lid is provided to prevent escape of a process gas which is required
- 10 in order to activate the plasma. The lid may be situated on top of the outer casing, i.e. covering the top of all the electrodes or may be situated at the bottom of the casing, i.e. covering the base of all the electrodes, dependent on whether the process gas used is lighter or heavier than air (e.g. helium and argon respectively).

- 15 [0027] The process gas for use in the plasma treatment process is preferably an inert gas selected from Helium and argon, alone or in combination with nitrogen, ammonia, O_2 , H_2O , NO_2 , air or hydrogen. Most preferably the process gas will be Helium alone or in combination with an oxidizing or reducing gas. The selection of gas depends upon the plasma processes to be undertaken. When an oxidizing or reducing process gas is required it
- 20 will preferably be utilized in mixture comprising 90 - 99% noble gas and 1 to 10% oxidizing or reducing gas.

- [0028] Under oxidising conditions the present method may be used to form an oxygen containing coating on the substrate. For example, silica-based coatings can be formed on the
- 25 substrate surface from atomised silicon-containing coating-forming materials. Under reducing conditions, the present method may be used to form oxygen free coatings, for example, silicon carbide based coatings may be formed from atomised silicon containing coating forming materials.

- 30 [0029] In a nitrogen containing atmosphere nitrogen can bind to the substrate surface, and in an atmosphere containing both nitrogen and oxygen, nitrates can bind to and/or form on the substrate surface. Such gases may also be used to pre-treat the substrate surface prior to exposure to a coating forming substance. For example oxygen containing plasma

treatment of the substrate may provide improved adhesion with the applied coating. The oxygen containing plasma being generated by introducing oxygen containing materials to the plasma such as oxygen gas or water.

5 [0030] A wide variety of plasma treatments are currently available, those of particular importance to the present invention are surface activation, surface cleaning, material etching and coating applications. Typically the substrate may be subjected to any appropriate treatment for example whilst passing through the first plasma region a substrate might be cleaned and when passing through the second plasma region the substrate might be surface activated, coated or
10 etched and in the case when further plasma regions are provided after the first and second plasma regions said additional plasma regions may, when the second plasma region is utilised to activate a surface, further activate the surface, or apply a coating and when the second plasma region is utilised to coat the substrate surface, the additional plasma regions might be utilised to activate the coated surface and then re-coat the surface, apply a one or more further coatings or
15 the like, dependent on the application for which the substrate is intended. For example a coating formed on a substrate may be post treated in a range of plasma conditions. For example, siloxane derived coatings may be further oxidised by oxygen containing plasma treatment. The oxygen containing plasma being generated by introducing oxygen containing materials to the plasma such as oxygen gas or water.

20

[0031] Any appropriate combination of plasma treatments may be used, for example the first plasma region may be utilised to clean the surface of the substrate by plasma treating using a helium gas plasma and the second plasma region is utilised to apply a coating, for example, by application of a liquid or solid spray through an atomiser or nebuliser as described in the
25 applicants co-pending unpublished patent application PCT/GB01/04272. The application of a coating of a liquid spray is particularly suited as the droplets in the spray will be subjected to gravitational feed unlike a gas such that the nebuliser is positioned in the assembly such that gravity feed of the coating material results in the coating precursor only passing through the second plasma region, thereby relying on gravity to prevent transfer of coating precursor into the
30 first plasma region. Alternatively the first plasma region might be utilised as a means of oxidation (in for example, an oxygen/Helium process gas) or the application of coating and the second plasma region is utilised to apply a second coating using a different precursor. As an example having a pre-treatment and post-treatment step is the following process adapted for

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the preparation of a SiO_x barrier with a soil/fuel resistant outer surface which may be utilised for solar cells or in auto applications in which the substrate is first pretreated by He cleaning/activation of substrate, followed by deposition of SiO_x from a polydimethylsiloxane precursor in the first plasma region. Further Helium plasma treatment to provide extra crosslinking of the SiO_x layer and finally applying a coating utilizing a perfluorinated precursor. Any appropriate pre-treatments may be undertaken for example the substrated may be washed, dried, cleaned or gas purged using the process gas for example helium.

[0032] The coating-forming material may be atomised using any conventional means, for example an ultrasonic nozzle. The atomiser preferably produces a coating-forming material drop size of from 10 to 100µm, more preferably from 10 to 50µm. Suitable atomisers for use in the present invention are ultrasonic nozzles from Sono-Tek Corporation, Milton, New York, USA. The apparatus of the present invention may include a plurality of atomisers, which may be of particular utility, for example, where the apparatus is to be used to form a copolymer coating on a substrate from two different coating-forming materials, where the monomers are immiscible or are in different phases, e.g. the first is a solid and the second is gaseous or liquid.

[0033] The present invention may be used to form many different types of substrate coatings. The type of coating which is formed on the substrate is determined by the coating-forming material(s) used, and the present method may be used to (co)polymerise coating-forming monomer material(s) onto the substrate surface. The coating-forming material may be organic or inorganic, solid, liquid or gaseous, or mixtures thereof. Suitable organic coating-forming materials include carboxylates, methacrylates, acrylates, styrenes, methacrylonitriles, alkenes and dienes, for example methyl methacrylate, ethyl methacrylate, propyl methacrylate, butyl methacrylate, and other alkyl methacrylates, and the corresponding acrylates, including organofunctional methacrylates and acrylates, including glycidyl methacrylate, trimethoxysilyl propyl methacrylate, allyl methacrylate, hydroxyethyl methacrylate, hydroxypropyl methacrylate, dialkylaminoalkyl methacrylates, and fluoroalkyl (meth)acrylates, methacrylic acid, acrylic acid, fumaric acid and esters, itaconic acid (and esters), maleic anhydride, styrene, α-methylstyrene, halogenated alkenes, for example, vinyl halides, such as vinyl chlorides and vinyl fluorides, and fluorinated alkenes, for example perfluoroalkenes, acrylonitrile, methacrylonitrile, ethylene, propylene, allylamine, vinylidene

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halides, butadienes, acrylamide, such as N-isopropylacrylamide, methacrylamide, epoxy compounds, for example glycidoxypolytrimethoxysilane, glycidol, styrene oxide, butadiene monoxide, ethyleneglycol diglycidylether, glycidyl methacrylate, bisphenol A diglycidylether (and its oligomers), vinylcyclohexene oxide, conducting polymers such as pyrrole and thiophene and their derivatives, and phosphorus-containing compounds, for example dimethylallylphosphonate. Suitable inorganic coating-forming materials include metals and metal oxides, including colloidal metals. Organometallic compounds may also be suitable coating-forming materials, including metal alkoxides such as titanates, tin alkoxides, zirconates and alkoxides of germanium and erbium.

10

[0034] Substrates may alternatively be provided with silica- or siloxane-based coatings using coating-forming compositions comprising silicon-containing materials. Suitable silicon-containing materials include silanes (for example, silane, alkylsilanes alkylhalosilanes, alkoxysilanes) and linear (for example, polydimethylsiloxane) and cyclic siloxanes (for example, octamethylcyclotetrasiloxane), including organo-functional linear and cyclic siloxanes (for example, Si-H containing, halo-functional, and haloalkyl-functional linear and cyclic siloxanes, e.g. tetramethylcyclotetrasiloxane and tri(nonofluorobutyl)trimethylcyclotrisiloxane). A mixture of different silicon-containing materials may be used, for example to tailor the physical properties of the substrate coating for a specified need (e.g. thermal properties, optical properties, such as refractive index, and viscoelastic properties).

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[0035] An advantage of the present invention over the prior art is that both liquid and solid atomised coating-forming materials may be used to form substrate coatings, due to the method of the present invention taking place under conditions of atmospheric pressure. Furthermore the coating-forming materials can be introduced into the plasma discharge or resulting stream in the absence of a carrier gas, i.e. they can be introduced directly by, for example, direct injection, whereby the coating forming materials are injected directly into the plasma.

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[0036] The substrate to be coated may comprise any material, sufficiently flexible to be transported through the assembly as hereinbefore described, for example plastics for example thermoplastics such as polyolefins e.g. polyethylene, and polypropylene.

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polycarbonates, polyurethanes, polyvinylchloride, polyesters (for example polyalkylene terephthalates, particularly polyethylene terephthalate), polymethacrylates (for example polymethylmethacrylate and polymers of hydroxyethylmethacrylate), polyepoxides, polysulphones, polyphenylenes, polyetherketones, polyimides, polyamides, polystyrenes, phenolic, epoxy and melamine-formaldehyde resins, and blends and copolymers thereof. Preferred organic polymeric materials are polyolefins, in particular polyethylene and polypropylene.

[0037] The substrate may be in the form of synthetic and/or, natural fibres, woven or non-woven fibres, powder, siloxane, fabrics, woven or non-woven fibres, natural fibres, synthetic fibres cellulosic material and powder or a blend of an organic polymeric material and a organosilicon-containing additive which is miscible or substantially non-miscible with the organic polymeric material as described in the applicants co-pending patent application WO 01/40359. For the avoidance of doubt "substantially non-miscible" means that the organosilicon-containing additive and the organic material have sufficiently different interaction parameters so as to be non-miscible in equilibrium conditions. This will typically, but not exclusively, be the case when the Solubility Parameters of the organosilicon-containing additive and the organic material differ by more than $0.5 \text{ MPa}^{1/2}$. However, the size of the substrate is limited by the dimensions of the volume within which the atmospheric pressure plasma discharge is generated, i.e. the distance between the electrodes of the means for generating the plasma. For typical plasma generating apparatus, the plasma is generated within a gap of from 5 to 50mm, for example 12 to 25mm. Thus, the present invention has particular utility for coating films, fibres and powders. The generation of a steady-state glow discharge plasma at atmospheric pressure is preferably obtained between adjacent electrodes which may be spaced up to 5 cm apart, dependent on the process gas used. The electrodes being radio frequency energised with an rms potential of 1 to 100 kV, preferably between 1 and 30 kV at 1 to 100 kHz, preferably at 15 to 40 kHz. The voltage used to form the plasma will typically be between 4 and 30 kVolts, however the actual value will depend on the chemistry/gas choice and plasma region size between the electrodes.

30

[0038] Substrates coated by the method of the present invention may have various uses. For example, a silica-based coating, generated in an oxidising atmosphere, may enhance the barrier and/or diffusion properties of the substrate, and may enhance the ability of

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additional materials to adhere to the substrate surface; a halo-functional organic or siloxane coating (e.g. perfluoroalkenes) may increase hydrophobicity, oleophobicity, fuel and soil resistance, and/or the release properties of the substrate; a polydimethylsiloxane coating may enhance water resistance and release properties of the substrate, and may enhance the softness of fabrics to touch; a polyacrylic acid polymeric coating may be used as an adhesive layer to promote adhesion to substrate surface or as part of laminated structure; the inclusion of colloidal metal species in the coatings may provide surface conductivity to the substrate, or enhance its optical properties. Polythiophene and polypyrrole give electrically conductive polymeric coatings which may also provide corrosion resistance on metallic substrates.

[0039] The invention will be more clearly understood from the following description of some embodiments thereof given by way of example only with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:-

Fig. 1 is a front view of an atmospheric pressure plasma system according to the invention,

Fig. 2 is a partially exploded perspective view of portion of the system illustrated in Fig. 1.

Fig. 3 is a plan view of the plasma assembly in accordance with the present invention

[0040] Referring to the drawings and Figs. 1 to 4 thereof, there is provided an atmospheric plasma system, indicated generally by the reference numeral 1 comprising an atmospheric pressure plasma assembly 2 fed by cables 3 by a power source 4 and also fed by a cooling water assembly feeding a cooling liquid distribution system mounted within the plasma assembly 2 and described in more detail later. The cooling water assembly comprises a water pump 5, a cooler in the form of a heat exchanger 6 and main water distribution pipes 7. One of the main water distribution pipes 7 feeds an inlet manifold 8 which in turn feeds, through feed water hoses 9 and liquid inlets 14, into the plasma assembly 2. Return water hoses 10 connect through liquid outlets 15, to a further return output manifold 11 which in turn is connected to another of the water distribution pipes 7 which feeds the pump 5. Pressure release pipes 13 are mounted in the plasma assembly 2.

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[0041] Referring now to Fig 2 in which there are provided three watertight boxes 20, 26
The watertight boxes indicated generally by the reference numeral 20 are joined by vertical
insulated spacers in the form of spacer plates 21 which form between the watertight boxes 20 an
5 open top 22 and an open bottom 23. Each watertight box 20 comprises a rear plate 30 and a
spaced apart front plate 31 mounted on a water containment frame 32 having a crossbar 33 in
which are provided drain-off holes 34. The rear plate 30 and the front plate 31 are connected to
the water containment frame 32 by gaskets 35. Two sets of wire electrodes 36 are mounted in
the box 20 on the front plate 31. The rear plate 30, front plate 31 and water containment frame
10 32 are manufactured of a suitable dielectric material. A pair of sparge poles 40 formed from
pipes of an insulation material, such as a plastics material, carrying a plurality of nozzles 41 are
mounted within the box 20 and are connected to the feed water hoses 9.

[0042] Between the watertight boxes 20 and the spacer plates 21, is a third watertight
15 box 26 of substantially the same construction as the boxes 20, in which parts similar to those
described for watertight box 20 below. The only difference between the box 26 and the box 20
is that it carries effectively two front plates 31 and carries electrodes 36 on each front plate 31
since the plates 31 act as front plates in respect of the boxes 20 on either side of the box 26. In
this embodiment, the nozzles 41 of the sparge poles 40 direct water onto both plates 31.

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[0043] In operation, a workpiece may be led through both plasma regions 25 and 60 in
the direction of the arrow A and then down in direction B. Process gas can be injected into the
plasma regions 25, 60 and suitable power can be provided to the electrodes 36 in the plasma
regions 25, 60 to effect a plasma. Water is delivered from the inlet manifold 8 through the feed
25 water hoses 9 into the sparge poles 40 where the water is delivered in a spray out the nozzles 41
onto the wire electrodes 36 and also across the exposed interior face of the front plate 31.

[0044] Referring now to Fig.3, there is provided a figure showing how a flexible
substrate is treated in accordance with the present invention. A means of transporting a
30 substrate through the assembly is provided in the form of guide rollers 70, 71 and 72, a process
gas inlet 75, an assembly lid 76 and an ultrasonic nozzle 74 for introducing an atomised liquid
into plasma region 60 are provided.

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[0045] In use a flexible substrate is transported to and over guide roller 70 and is thereby guided through plasma region 25 between watertight boxes 20a and 26. The plasma in the plasma region 25 is a cleaning helium plasma, i.e. no reactive agent is directed into plasma 25. The helium is introduced into the system by way of inlet 75. Lid 76 is placed over the top of the system to prevent the escape of helium as it is lighter than air. Upon leaving plasma region 25 the plasma cleaned substrate passes over guide 71 and is directed down through plasma region 60, between electrodes 26 and 20b and over roller 72 and then may pass to further units of the same type for further treatment. However, plasma region 60 generates a coating for the substrate by means of the injection of a liquid or solid coating making material through ultrasonic nozzle 74. An important aspect of the fact that the reactive agent being coated is a liquid or solid is that said atomised liquid or solid travels under gravity through plasma region 60 and is kept separate from plasma region 25 and as such no coating occurs in plasma region 25. The coated substrate then passes through plasma region 60 and is coated and then is transported over roller 72 and is collected or further treated with additional plasma treatments. Rollers 70 and 72 may be reels as opposed to rollers. Having passed through is adapted to guide the substrate into plasma region 25 and on to roller 71.

[0046] It has been found surprisingly that in addition to cooling, the water in accordance with the present invention, also acts to electrically passivate any boundaries, singularities or non-uniformities in the metal electrodes such as edges, corners or mesh ends where wire mesh electrodes are used. It will be appreciated that these, without passivation, can discharge a Corona or other plasma, causing power loss and local heating leading potentially to breakdown. Essentially, the water itself acts as an electrode of limited conductivity to smooth out potential differences and damp out unwanted electrical discharges inside the electrode box. Typically, the plasma generated in the inter-electrode gap will extend about 5 cm beyond the edge of the metal electrode due to water conductivity. Further, there are major advantages in longer residence time in the plasma region which allows the plasma to access all parts of a workpiece surface enhancing uniformity of treatment. This is particularly important with intricately formed workpieces. It has been found with the present invention that it is possible to maintain low electrode temperatures even with high plasma power densities ensuring long equipment lifetimes and elimination of excessive thermal burdens on the workpiece. Radio Frequency power was applied using a power supply to the electrodes via matching transformers at approximately 40 kHz and about 30 kW of RF power.

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[0047] The specification the terms "comprise, comprises, comprised and comprising" or any variation thereof and the terms "include, includes, included and including" or any variation thereof are considered to be totally interchangeable and they should all be afforded the widest possible interpretation.

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CLAIMS

1. An atmospheric pressure plasma assembly of the type comprising a first and second pair of vertically arrayed parallel spaced-apart planar electrodes with at least one dielectric plate between said first pair, adjacent one electrode and at least one dielectric plate between said second pair adjacent one electrode, the spacing between the dielectric plate and the other dielectric plate or electrode of each of the first and second pairs of electrodes forming a first and second plasma region characterised in that the assembly further comprises a means of transporting a substrate successively through said first and second plasma regions and is adapted such that said substrate would be subjected to a different plasma treatment in each plasma region.
2. An assembly in accordance with claim 1 wherein the substrate is transported through said first and second plasma regions by means of guide rollers and/or guide reels.
3. An assembly in accordance with any preceding claim wherein each electrode comprises an electrode unit containing an electrode and an adjacent a dielectric plate and a cooling liquid distribution system for directing a cooling conductive liquid onto the exterior of the electrode to cover a planar face of the electrode.
4. An assembly in accordance with claim 3 wherein the cooling conductive liquid is water.
5. An assembly in accordance with claim 3 wherein the electrode unit is in the form of a watertight box having a side formed by a dielectric plate having bonded thereto on the interior of the box a planar electrode together with a liquid inlet and a liquid outlet.

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6. An assembly in accordance with any preceding claim retained in an outer casing in which a lid is provided to prevent escape of a process gas which is required in order to activate the plasma.
7. An assembly in accordance with any preceding claim wherein there is provided an atomiser for atomizing a liquid or solid coating making material which atomised material is utilised to coat the substrate in one plasma region.
8. An assembly in accordance with claim 6 wherein the atomiser is an ultrasonic nozzle.
9. A method of plasma treating a substrate comprising using the apparatus described in any preceding claim.
10. A method in accordance with claim 8 wherein the substrate is synthetic and/or, natural fibres, woven or non-woven fibres, powder, siloxane, fabrics, woven or non-woven fibres, natural fibres, synthetic fibres cellulosic material and powder or a blend of an organic polymeric material and an organosilicon-containing additive.
11. A method in accordance with claim 8 or 9 wherein the first plasma region through which the substrate passes is a cleaning plasma and the second plasma region through which the substrate passes effects a coating on the substrate by means of an atomised liquid or solid coating forming material.
12. An atmospheric pressure plasma assembly is hereinbefore described with reference to the drawings.

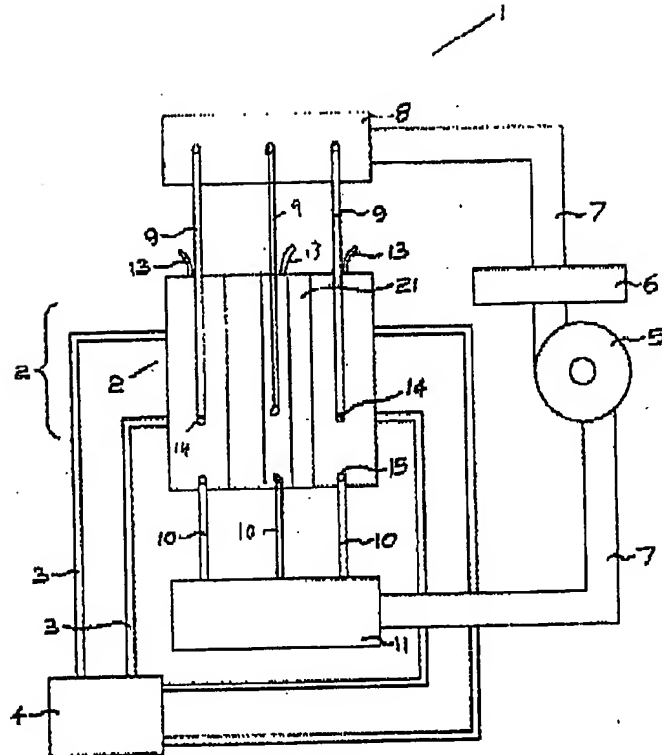


Fig. 1

Fig. 2

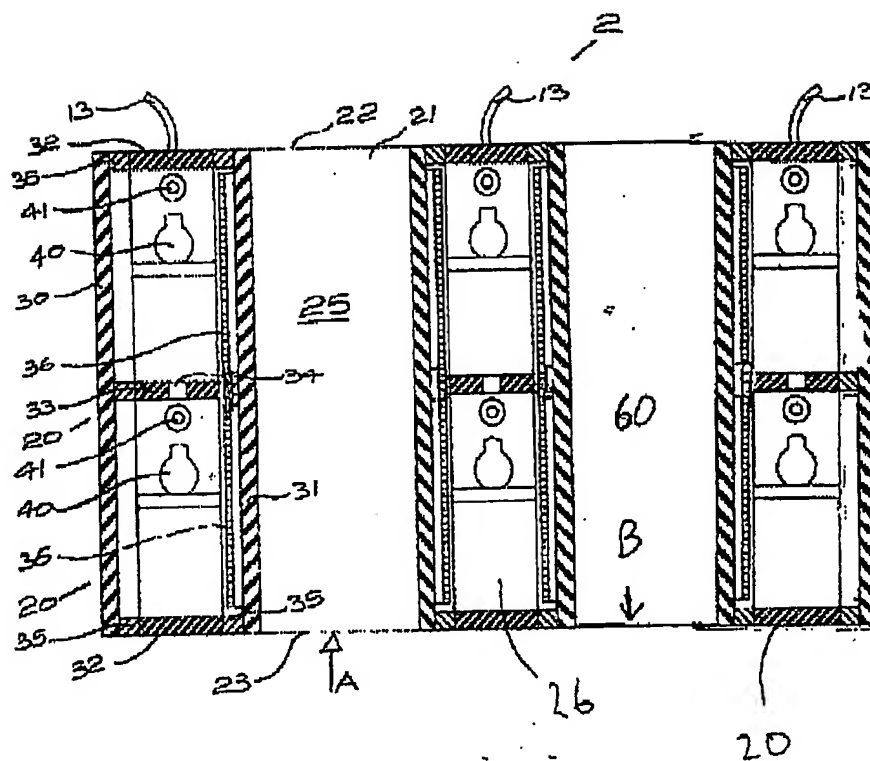
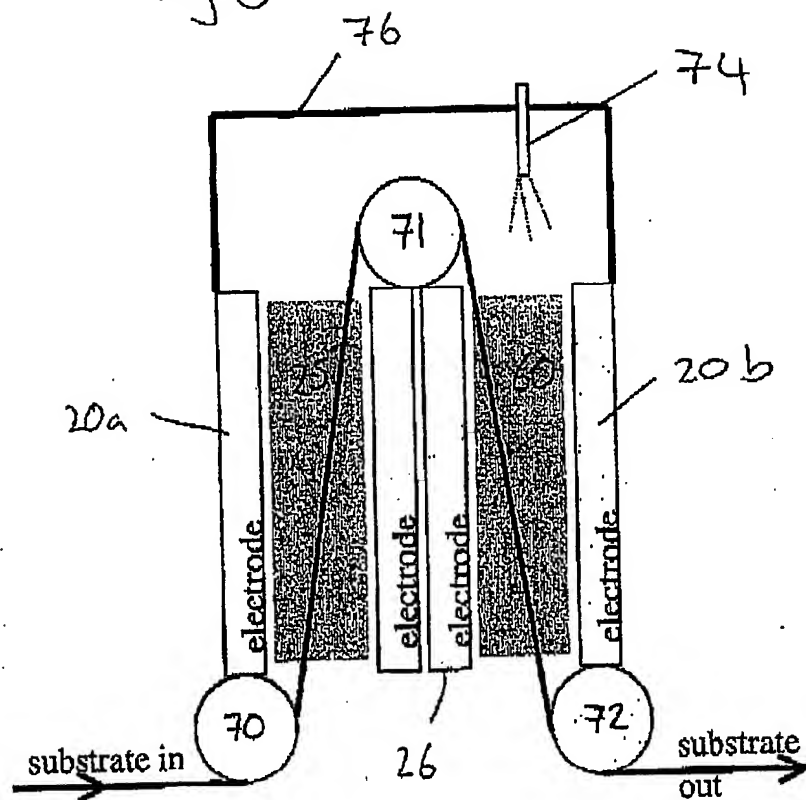


Fig. 3



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